

I am greatly optimistic about this book

By Priyadarshini Chatterjee

She is incongruously cheerful and merry a person, to write a book she herself tags as 'grim', author DIPIKA MUKHERJEE, gives out a clear impression of a person well-versed with the nuances of life and her book *Thunder Demons* further convinces one of the author's ability to deal with the complex intricacies of human relationships and human purpose juxtaposed with the convulsion of a society faced by the demons (racism, religious militancy, etc) that threaten to shake and topple its very foundations. The book is about Agni, a young girl who returns to Malaysia to reclaim the country as her home at a time when the country is being ravaged by its own Frankenstein. In Kolkata recently for the launch of her book, Dipika bares the ugly visage of the *Thunder Demons*, her passion for words, what it means to be an itinerant and more.

What prompted you to write *Thunder Demons*?

I have lived in Malaysia for many years now and have a Malaysian spouse and child. Malaysia is portrayed as a "Truly Asia" experience which is essentially is, but the rise of religious fundamentalism and the racism inherent in Malaysian government policies is making Malaysia a country with seething civil rights issues which need to be addressed. Although I consider Malaysia home, I found it difficult to work and rear a family there because of the socio-political climate. However, I am greatly optimistic about Malaysians and this book adds to a growing number of voices that protesting the inherent flaws in the political system which fails to treat all Malaysians as equal, and instead is segregating the population into the *bumiputras* (sons of the soil, mostly the Malay race with some exceptions) and the *non-bumiputra* (the Chinese and Indian Malaysians, who have made Malaysia their homes for many generations). This essential division of all Malaysians based on ethnic origin has created a schism in Malaysian society and although questioning the special advantages of the Malays can be deemed as sedition, civil movements have been gaining ground to address the racism inherent in this apartheid system of government. This is not a question of ethnicity or of religion, but one of basic human rights; that all citizens should be treated as equals, regardless of racial origin.

What has shaped your view of Malaysia as portrayed in your book?

I think this book is about my love for Malaysia — I portray the protagonist as returning to Malaysia and wanting to claim the country as her own. Very often, especially in fiction published in America, (*The Kite Runner* and *Jasmine* are names that come to mind at once) migration to the West is seen as a panacea for the ills of an Asian society. I find such narratives offensive. A large number of people survive in various parts of the world and happily do so. Malaysia, too, despite its problems, is an amazing country to live in, and I would like to make it my own, just as Agni does in the book. The need to improve the place one lives in is a basic human trait. Anna Hazare's movement in India to clean up the government has parallels with the Bersih march on the streets of Kuala Lumpur in July 2011.

Could you elaborate on the title of the book?



Thunder Demons is a reference to the Thunder Demon's tooth that Jay Ghosh (one of the characters in the book) wears around his neck as a talisman — this combination of fable and folklore in the face of unacknowledged reality is one of the themes, the book underscores. *Thunder Demons* also refers to the essential troublemakers who incite violence and thrive on chaos — the story begins with murder of a model in the fields of Shah Alam and their shadows the characters peeping this book.

Tell us something about the main characters in the book. You have said that your stories often draw from the well of reality. Were you inspired by any real-life characters in shaping those who people your book?

I'm going to get into trouble for this one! I think all writers shape their characters drawing the rudiments from people they know, stories they hear, or scandals whispered by garrulous tongues. If my characters weren't formed from aspects of real people, they would have been mere cardboard figures, with no relevance to anyone human. This book is strewn with stories I have heard over time in Malaysia — from ancient anecdotes from the Malay Annals to the persistent belief in thieves who 'charm' their way into robbing homes. Magic and superstition has retained its clout in everyday Malaysian life and this, among other things, makes life in Malaysia extraordinary.

A book like this must have required a lot of research. Could you share particular anecdotes from your research process? What were the challenges, if any, that you might have faced during the course of your research?

The topic of my doctoral dissertation in Sociolinguistics from Texas in 1995

was language change in a Malaysian community; earlier this year, in April 2011, I co-edited the book, *Language Shifts among Malaysian Minorities as Effects of National Language Planning: Speaking in Many Tongues* which was published by the Amsterdam University Press. My academic work for almost the past two decades has touched on Malaysia, and I am sentiment of the variegated fabric of Malaysian history and socio-politics, both as an academic as well as a resident. During the initial stages of writing this book I was living in Singapore and I researched about life and times of Malay, including the way of life during the Japanese occupation. I was also constantly reading newspapers and blog posts pertaining to Malaysia. I have worked in the Malaysian media for some time and continue to have friends who send me articles written there. Because of the censorship and sedition laws in Malaysia, some works are easier to access when outside the country than from within. However, although I acknowledge my debt to other researchers, writers and social commentators at the end of the book, I must stress that *Thunder Demons* is a work of fiction, and should be read in that spirit. **Writing a book over a period of eight years certainly has its own challenges. What were they? Besides how did you cope with your own changing sensibilities, both in writing and thoughts?**

This book has undergone many changes, including changes to the title changing the story from the viewpoint of an old lady to a young and dynamic one. I had started this story as a generational saga, but as generation sagas became almost a trademark of diasporic writing, I wanted to do something different. Other Malaysian writers wrote sto-

ries that stopped at the Japanese Occupation or in the 80's — I wanted to write about the issues that are relevant to Malaysians today, and although it is an edgier topic, I wasn't aspiring to write a 'safe' book anyway. **You have led the life of an itinerant. Perhaps, building a home everywhere you go. How does this sense of displacement and change fit into the evolution of your writing sensibility, if at all?**

I get asked this question in practically every interview!! The fact that I have three official homes (India, Malaysia and the USA) and that I can write about many places as an insider, I think, saves me from the flag-waving jingoism that is the root of many global problems. I had a pretty traumatic childhood with my father in the diplomatic service and consequently being moved every three years, but now that experience has given me an easy adaptability. *Thunder Demons* is set in Malaysia; my second novel *Finding Pyra* is set in India with an NRI princess from Ohio as the protagonist. Maybe my third novel will be about China — I would love to write about China!

Could you share some of your travelling anecdotes that have specifically shaped your thinking and writing?

I first learnt to love words in Wellington, New Zealand; New Zealand is a small country with an amazing reading program and large group of talented writers. Amsterdam introduced me to a very diverse fiction critique group that read *Thunder Demons* in its entirety and helped me edit it to what the novel is today. I also found my first agent and literary mentor in Amsterdam. I learn a lot from small countries with large literary appetites. **You mentioned that *Thunder Demons* is faced by the risk of being banned in Malaysia. What challenges did you face**

while writing something as radical, considering such pressures? Have you had to compromise at any point considering such pressures?

In relation to the recent Bersih protest in Malaysia in July 2011, the 76-year old National Laureate of Malaysia, A Samad Said, was investigated for sedition for reading out a poem and being part of what the government termed an illegal assembly. Although Malaysian writers, artists and political activists immediately banded together to condemn the police harassment, this incident clearly illustrated the applicability of draconian sedition laws to peaceful protests. It is easier for someone like me, living outside, to write about the country than for someone from the inside. The Internal Security Act is still in force in Malaysia and can detain dissenters indefinitely without a trial. And although there is talk about repealing this law as well as the one that muffles the media by requiring publications to renew their printing licenses annually, there is some skepticism about how real the changes will actually be. However, I have to say that I also took out a statement about the book due to the publisher's fears of retaliation from Hindu fanatics who seem to take umbrage at any perceived insults to the religion. It was not a key statement, but it made me intensely aware of the fact that no country really practices complete freedom of speech — in democracies, political correctness and self-censorship are also forces that silence.

Poems, short stories, novel, and also distinct genres of writing. What sort of transitions do you undergo while moving from one genre to the other?

I am passionate about words — my academic work deals with linguistics, the study of language(s), and my creative writing is essential to my wellbeing. I am a person who needs change to be creative. I think, and moving from poetry to prose to academic writing gives me a necessary variety — otherwise I get bogged down and slip into a mental-block of sorts. But, the bottom line is that I am passionate about writing, irrespective of the form or genre. I can stay up nights; go without food, etc in order to finish what I am writing. It makes me jump out of bed every morning, even on the bad days when the editing isn't going so well. Writers have to be, I think, intrinsically selfish, about acquiring the time and space to write. Nothing else in my life demands such unmitigated slowness or gets it.

Your book was long listed The Man Asian.

The Man Asian Literary Prize has now changed the rules, but in 2009, only unpublished manuscripts could be submitted for the contest. I submitted mine and suddenly I was in a list with Su Tong! I am such a fan of Su Tong that simply being in the same list as him felt like winning.

Who have been your favourite authors and which writers have influenced your writing?

I read everything I can lay my hands on. I have developed a proclivity for Chinese authors lately. As I mentioned before, I love Su Tong. Besides, there are certain fresh Malaysian authors who have triggered my interest, one among them would be Brian Gomez. Pakistani authors like Kamila Shamsie and Nadine Aslam feature high on my list of favourites. Among Indian authors I love reading Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay* remains my favourite collection of short stories. Other favourites include Barbara Kingsolver and AS Byatt.

newsmakers



Mamata promises to start writing again

The literary side of West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee will come to the fore again with Banerjee promising to write a regular column in the party's weekly mouthpiece, *Jaago Bangla*. After Kali Puja (October end), I promise to start a column in the publication (*Jaago Bangla*). Earlier I used to write regularly

but now I am stretched for time. But I would write for sure," she said at the launch of the weekly's annual issue. Banerjee has penned over two dozen books including a collection of children's rhymes titled *Jhok Chhara* (Strange Rhymes). Apart from writing, the firebrand leader is also known for her paintings as well as giving music and penning lyrics for Bengali songs. An exhibition of Banerjee's paintings held earlier

in the year fetched several lakhs of rupees.

Ghosh, Gangopadhyay shortlisted for Hindu prize

Seven writers, including Amitav Ghosh, Sunil Gangopadhyay and UR Ananthamurthy, are in the fray for the Hindu Best Fiction Award 2011, a Chennai-based newspaper group has announced. The shortlist for the award was unveiled by journalist Manu Joseph, who won the



award last year for his *Serious Men*, at the end of the day-long Hindu Lit for Life festival in the presence of the panel of four judges and organisers. The award will be presented on October 30 in Chennai. The shortlist includes *River of Smoke* by Amitav Ghosh, *The Fakir* (translated from Bengali) by Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Bharatipura* by UR Ananthamurthy (translated from Malayalam), *Litanies of the Dutch Battery* by NS Madhavan (translated from Malayalam), *The Folded Earth* by Anuradha Roy, *The Sky Company of People Who Care* by Rahul Bhattacharya, and *The Storyteller of Marrakesh* by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya. The jury had received 129 submissions for the award this year.

Adele to record Bond theme

If rumours are to be believed then singer Adele has finished writing the James Bond theme song and will soon be recording it. The *Someone Like You* singer is preparing to go into the studio to record the track and will then submit it for the spy adventure which is currently being filmed, reports femalefirst.co.uk. "Adele is the obvious choice to record the next Bond theme. The last few songs for the spy movies have hardly set the



Pattinson, the sexiest man alive

Actor Robert Pattinson has been named the world's sexiest man. Pattinson has topped *Glamour* magazine's 50 Sexiest Men poll for the third year running, beating actor Taylor Lautner who came second. Actor Johnny Depp came third while soccer star David Beckham and *High School Musical* actor Zac Efron took fourth and fifth position respectively. The rating was compiled from over 40,000 votes by readers of the magazine.

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